

From Oral History to Textual Habitus: A Genealogical Odyssey in India

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Keywords: genealogical documents, oral history, information brokers, living documents, recordkeeping traditions in India

Format: Paper presentation (verbal with images, animated GIFs, videos, and paper handouts)

Equipment: Computer with projector

Theme: Contemporary documentalist investigation of a historical tradition of “genealogy registers” that are now endangered despite, or on account of, digitization.

Paper Proposal

"The perpetuation of society as we are accustomed to conceive or idealize it is dependent to a very large extent on the preservation en masse of our accumulated group memories and consciousness stored in the form of written, printed, and otherwise recorded word or symbol."

— Guy Petherbridge

At the DOCAM 2015 Annual Meeting in Sydney, I presented a reflective paper on cave paintings as "immutable" documents within a certain cultural context (Narayan, 2015). In the oral presentation for that paper, I briefly mentioned a specific genealogical tradition in India that has documented family history for hundreds of years. Since then, I have been on a quest to find out more about this elaborate, but, ironically, undocumented tradition of documentation. Since 2015, this has led me from examining my own family history, and what seemed like a family mythology was suddenly transformed into a documented "fact."

Once a year, on the death anniversary of the most recently deceased member of the family, my extended family would gather around a ritual fire pit, and learn, recite, and invoke the names of every family member going back about five generations. And then we recite the name of the original ancestor; this ancestor's name is also referred to as a *gotra*, most closely analogous to the notion of a clan. This information is not written down within the family but is only passed on orally every year, from generation to generation, and only on this one day. I always thought that this genealogy was just some family myth, and yet, I have now discovered that this genealogical record can be found in a written form, and is up-to-date, at one location, thousands of miles away. How does this happen?

Every Hindu elder of every generation in every family makes a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Haridwar, often after they retire, to record the details of their family. It's often called a pilgrimage, but now I've discovered that in reality, it is a genealogy trip. When a person walks around this city, s/he is approached by information brokers who want to know if you're looking for your family's "genealogy register"; there are more than thousands of such information brokers just in this small pilgrimage town, and each one of them carries the "index" of states, regions, and villages – the metadata – in their head. Once they have triangulated the information you provide, they direct you to one of the pundits or *pandas*, who hold your family genealogy among thousands of others; there are 45,000 such pundits in this town.

Once family name, clan name, and ancestral village names are confirmed, the pundit opens a steel vault and retrieves a rolled-up, bound, document scroll called a *vahi* (a genealogy register), written on archival paper with Indigo ink. In the past, this ink was made with the sap of Banana trees, burnt Apricot peelings, and other secret ingredients, all boiled down to viscous perfection in a cauldron, and rather than archival paper, they used palm-leaf sheets stitched together. The price of looking at these records is a small donation to the family that maintains it – they spend hours copying records from one scroll to another every few decades. A visitor cannot alter any of the existing records, and is also required to state one's place within this family and extend the records with new accounts of births, deaths, and marriages, and one's reason for the visit; people often come to this town to inter the ashes of a family member in the river Ganges. The pundit writes it all down and then asks you to sign it. He then gives you a bag of sweets to take home to your family, and puts a plate out for the donation.

Since the 1990s these documents have been granted legal status in India, and are even admissible in court in family disputes (Kundalia, 2015). Some records go back to 1194 AD, with the older ones on palm leaf, although they are rapidly being lost to the vagaries of time. Some of these records have been microfilmed and are now part of the Granite Mountain Records Vault in the US, but the very process of this digitization is now a highly sensitive matter for the pundits who have no access to these records themselves.

This paper will present my journey of discovery around this record-keeping obsession in a country often called the "Document Raj" (Raman, 2012) and also my visit to some of these living archives that have a high relevance to Indians in India and the Indian diaspora.

References

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